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ABSTRACT

This fastback examines the origins and meanings of community education. In the first chapter, the contemporary conditions that have spawned a renewed interest in the concept of community education are contrasted with the conditions that initiated the movement 25 years ago. The second chapter, which examines community education as a program, discusses the following topics: the components of community education programs (needs assessment, leadership, community involvement, physical facilities, participants, and instructors/leaders); steps in program development (assessment, planning, implementation, evaluation, and reassessment); and community education programs that are currently being offered in four cities (Flint, Michigan; Austin, Texas; York, Nebraska; and Elk River, Minnesota). Community education is viewed in terms of a process, i.e., the structure, procedures and intent of interaction among individuals, organizations, agencies, and institutions in a community. Programs which serve as good examples of process are reviewed in the following areas: Birmingham, Michigan; School District No. 2 in New York City; and Independence, Missouri. The potential pitfalls and benefits of community education are outlined in the final chapter. A 13-item bibliography concludes the fastback. (MN)

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# Community Education: Processes and Programs

Theodore J. Kowalski,
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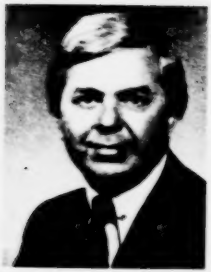

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Series Editor, Derek L. Burleson

# Community Education: Processes and Programs

by
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# Introduction

"Community education is on the threshold of a major breakthrough. It has captured the imagination of both educational and lay leaders throughout the U.S." Although these words are an appropriate description of community education today, they were written by V. M. Kerensky 14 years ago. An idea that never took hold to the degree its advocates predicted, community education, nevertheless, refuses to die. Over the past two or three years, the interest of educational leaders has been stimulated once again by this proposal for expanding the mission and decision-making processes of public schools.

In 49 of the 50 states (Hawaii being the exception), local school boards establish educational policy. Within this governance context, the relationship between the school system and its community is fundamental. Historically, the public schools could count on a guaranteed clientele and faced little, if any, competition. As a result, school boards and administrators planned and implemented programs without substantive community input. Today public school officials are recognizing that perpetuating this isolationism creates weighty problems. A growing number of taxpayers no longer have direct contact with the schools. In many communities, nonpublic schools provide parents and students with alternatives for schooling. As a result, the fiscal and political support once taken for granted now must be nurtured. Given these conditions, it is not surprising that a growing num-

ber of educators and civic leaders are seeking alternatives to the practices that have isolated the decision-making processes of public schools. One of these options is called community education.

In the early 1960s there were very few teachers and administrators who had ever heard of community education. Yet by the early 1970s the concept could be found in 1,920 community schools across the United States. Such growth did little, however, to clarify the meaning of this new movement in public education. As a result, the movement tended to be viewed narrowly in terms of a single program, such as recreational opportunities for adults. Primarily because of such ambiguity, the movement lost momentum after the early 1970s.

This fastback examines the origins and meanings of community education. In particular, contemporary conditions spawning renewed interest in the concept are contrasted with conditions that initiated the movement 25 years ago. Community education is examined as a process and as a program. Its promises and potential pitfalls are discussed. And within these presentations, examples of outstanding programs and organizational designs are provided.

## A Meaning and a Beginning

Although community education has existed for several decades, its meaning is not clear to the majority of citizens and educators. Many inquire about the concept, some because they simply are not familiar with the concept at all, others because they are confused. A number of definitions have been put forward, but they have not eradicated ignorance and confusion. Some skeptics even suggest that a comprehensive definition is impossible. Community educators have been accused of trying to include everything in the universe in their movement. Essentially, definitions of community education fall into one of four categories:

1. definitions that identify community education as a process,
2. definitions that identify community education as a program(s),
3. definitions that identify community education as both a program(s) and a process, and
4. definitions that identify community education as a philosophical position concerning governance and problem solving.

Even though the literature included references to expanding the mission of public education as early as the turn of this century, it was not until the mid-1950s that the community education movement began to receive specific notice. These first recognitions frequently concentrated on the "community school." In his book, *School and*

*Community* (1954), Edward Olsen summarized the characteristics of a community school as follows:

1. improves the quality of living here and now,
2. uses the community as a laboratory for learning,
3. makes the school plant a community center,
4. organizes the core curriculum around the processes and problems of living,
5. includes lay people in school policy and program planning,
6. leads in community coordination, and
7. practices and promotes democracy in all human relationships.

As the movement expanded, writers began to offer definitions of community education that focused on process. Jack Minzey and Clarence Olsen, leading scholars in this field, offered the following definition in 1969:

> Community education is a process that concerns itself with everything that affects the well-being of all citizens within a given community. This definition extends the role of community education from one of the traditional concepts of teaching children to one of identifying the needs, problems, and wants of the community and then assisting in the developing of facilities, programs, staff, and leadership toward improving the entire community.

Other definitions were developed that attempted to define community education as both process and program. These descriptions often suggest that process and program are inseparable and mutually dependent. Such a definition was offered by Fallon in 1973:

> First, the program component is an integral part of the process of community education and deals with the overt activities of a school-community. Programs are generally the outgrowth of some expressed community need or desire and are designed accordingly. Moreover, the initial level of entry into the process of community education is often at the program level.

A final type of definition focuses on community education as a comprehensive philosophy. Such a definition was developed by the Na-

tional Community Education Association in 1971. It identifies community education as follows:

> It is a philosophy that pervades all segments of educational programming and directs the thrust of each of them toward the needs of the community. The community school serves as a catalytic agent by providing leadership to mobilize community problems. This marshalling of all forces in the community helps to bring about change as the school extends itself to all people.

Although these definitions differ in focus, each indicates that the local schools have a mission beyond teaching children. Additionally, a strategy for mobilizing the community to address its needs and solve its problems becomes a necessary ingredient. This latter quality is most important. The concept of the school working in harmony with the community to reach decisions is contrary to the cherished management tenet that only a few high-ranking officials should be involved in key decisions. Community education promotes an "open" climate where participatory processes are encouraged and utilized.

The 1960s ushered in a period of change in American society. The passage of the Civil Rights Act, the war in Vietnam, and riots in our major cities gave rise to new concerns. The schools were expected to address all these issues. Proposals for education reform emerged, some abetted by federal dollars, some the products of curricular studies, and some sparked by social conscience. It was during these unsettling times that community education began to build momentum.

In addition to social unrest, public education confronted additional changes during this period. The small town rapidly was disappearing. Urbanization and development of suburbs created challenges for all human services agencies. Crime, racial segregation, alienation, and like maladies emerged as by-products of urban migration. Community education was viewed as one method of attacking some of these undesirable conditions. The idea was to provide, through the neighborhood school, a new sense of community identity by breaking large cities and suburbs into smaller units. In doing so, it was hoped that some attributes of the small town could be recaptured.

Additionally, community education was a response to the criticism that schools were not as productive as they could be. Representing

sizable investments of public funds, school buildings stand empty a good portion of the year. By infusing total community needs into the education system, community education raised expectations that taxpayers would get more for their money. In particular, non-school-age residents would be the beneficiaries of expanded programming. Not surprisingly, early efforts in creating community schools focused on one or two particular programs that were easy to initiate and manage (for example, evening recreation programs for adults).

Today the interest in community education stems from somewhat different conditions. True, there remains considerable dissatisfaction with the performance of schools. Likewise, some taxpayers persist in their belief that public schools are capable of delivering more and better services. But in addition to these perennial concerns, several recent trends contribute to the appeal of community education. Among the more cogent are the following:

1. Enrollments have declined markedly in many school systems; and coupled with an increasing average age in the general population, there are more and more citizens who pay taxes to sustain an institution that appears to offer no observable benefits to them. Taxpayer revolts, such as Proposition 13 in California in 1978, are a product of this condition.

2. American society is changing rapidly with regard to educational values. Once considered necessary only for children and youth, organized education increasingly is being viewed as a lifelong activity. Adult education is one of the most conspicuous outgrowths of this philosophical shift. Quite naturally, communities turn to their local public schools as the prime provider of these desired services, particularly in communities not having access to a community college, a four-year institution of higher education, or a well-developed community center.

3. The proliferation of collective bargaining in the public sector and insights from organizational research are causing scholars and practitioners to rethink governance practices in public service organizations. For years, educational administration was influenced heavily by the management models and practices developed in private industry. These practices worked reasonably well in bureaucratic or-

ganizations that were isolated from external influences. A large manufacturing company, for example, did not ask the public how it should proceed with disposing of its waste products. In like fashion, many school districts did not solicit advice from their patrons regarding the content of curricula. School districts now are paying a price for being insulated from the general public. Research reveals that public organizations, such as school systems, function more effectively when they are interacting with community groups. As a new generation of school administrators puts this theory into practice, community education is becoming a more palatable option.

Thus a need to broaden support for schools, the acceptance of education as a lifelong activity, and the acknowledgment that public institutions function more effectively with participatory processes are factors combining to generate what might be termed as the "second coming of community education." Current interest in community education tends to focus on the process elements, whereas the movement of 25 years ago was program oriented. Nevertheless, both program and process remain essential elements of the concept. What follows is an examination of each of these elements and examples of the successful application of community education.



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## Community Education as a Program

Programs are the most basic and most popular form of participation in community education activities. From the perspective of the community, programs are community education. Community education can be defined on two levels. First is a single program, a structured and regularly scheduled activity in which individuals participate, based on interest, perceived need, or desire. On another level, a community education program is the sum of all community education activities, the purposes of which may be educational, recreational, vocational, or social. Moreover, these programs are designed for people of all ages.

While the public school usually is the key local agency involved in the development of community education, programs can be conducted under the auspices of other community organizations and involve citizens as instructors and leaders. The rationale for this broader approach becomes clear by reviewing three basic characteristics of communities.

First, in every community there are unmet human needs, desires, and interests. Some of these needs and interests are known because of existing data about a community or a sector of its population; others become evident by examining group attitudes or feelings. These unsolved problems become the focus of community education. By addressing unmet needs, desires, interests, and problems, community education

programs provide valuable community services. Second, in every community there are unused or under-utilized resources. These include: 1) physical resources (schools and other community buildings); 2) human resources (individuals in the community with skill, talent, knowledge, and available time); and 3) financial resources (funds that can be made available for new initiatives). Third, and most important, in every community there is untapped potential for creative leadership, which can mobilize unused resources to serve unmet needs, desires, and problems. Through exercise of this leadership, new patterns of community involvement emerge in the form of various programs.

## Components of Community Education Programs

How are programs developed? Who is involved in program management? Answers to these questions provide the basic elements of community education programs.

*Needs Assessment.* Community education programs should be based on some form of needs assessment. It may be as formal as a comprehensive community survey or as informal as a small-group discussion. Sometimes new data are collected; other times existing data are reviewed from fresh or different perspectives. This information is examined for clues as to what types of programs can be provided to meet specific needs and, further, at what times and under what conditions to ensure maximum participation.

*Leadership.* The development and management of community education programs require administrative leadership by an individual commonly identified as the Director of Community Education or Community School Director. This person's functions include program design based on needs assessment, program scheduling, staffing, and evaluation. Although community education administrators often are housed in public school facilities, the programs they oversee and the clientele they serve are quite different from the K-12 program in operation from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. It is common for community education directors to work from 4:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. Monday through Friday and all day Saturday supervising programs and serving recreational, cultural, and vocational needs of all age groups.

*Community Involvement.* Successful community education programs involve citizens in roles other than as program participants. In many places community education councils have been established to advise administrators on program and management issues or to participate directly in program development decisions. Such community involvement ensures that programs are serving real needs, and it develops a sense of ownership in such programs.

*Physical Facilities.* Community education programs require accessible and adaptable facilities. Typically, school buildings serve as sites for community education programs; but YMCAs, community colleges, recreational centers, or other community facilities also are used. A consideration in the use of nonschool facilities is that the programs generally take on the perceived purpose of the institution or agency providing the facility.

*Participants.* Obviously, without participants there would be no programs; and participants can be as diverse as the population in the community – from toddlers as young as age two to the elderly. Because of the nature of specific programs, participants usually represent homogeneous age groupings. Increasingly, however, family-centered programs and intergenerational activities are provided.

*Instructors/Leaders.* Like most educational programs, community education programs involve instructors or leaders. They may be paid or volunteers, certified teachers or local artists. The credentials needed are experience and expertise in the program area.

## Steps in Program Development

Given the basic components of community education programs, we shall now consider the steps in program development. The steps and a brief explanation of their attendant activities are detailed below.

| Program Development Step | Activities |
|---|---|
| Assessment | Identifying and defining needs, desires, interests, and problems; and locating human, physical, and financial resources. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Planning | Matching needs, desires, interests, and problems with available resources; and scheduling programs. |
| Implementation | Publicizing and conducting the programs. |
| Evaluation | Assessing the impact of programs as to whether needs and desires were met and problems were solved. |
| Reassessment | Recycling the step of identifying needs, desires, interests, and problems; and locating resources in light of program implementation. |

A question that often comes up in program development is the relationship of community education programs to the K-12 curriculum. Some suggest that community education programs are simply logical and natural extensions of the school's instructional mission, with the major difference being that they are conducted in the late afternoon, in the evening, or on weekends. This view runs the risk of community education programs being considered mere add-ons to the existing school program. Others view community education and the K-12 program as indistinguishable in purpose, concept, and practice. The important point here is that, regardless of the perceived relationships between community education and the regular school program, there should be articulation between them that is mutually reinforcing.

Such articulation is possible when the school serves as an umbrella agency in community education programming, even though other agencies are involved in specific program thrusts. The school serves a facilitative function through which programs are coordinated.

## Community Education in Action

According to the National Community Education Association, there are more than 10,000 community education/community school programs operating in the United States. These programs range from single school initiatives to comprehensive, city-wide efforts. Over the

years several community education programs have distinguished themselves. Following are brief descriptions of some of these programs.

**Flint, Michigan.** The community education program in Flint, a city of 145,000, is recognized internationally as the birthplace of community education. Virtually every public school serves as the center for an array of educational, social, recreational, and health programs and services. To accommodate these programs, Flint schools typically operate on a schedule that begins in the early morning and ends in the late evening, as well as operating on weekends and during the summer. Participants include individuals of all ages.

The Flint program epitomizes the concept of the full-service school, which assumes that every school must be sensitive to the needs and concerns of residents in its service area.

During 1985 hundreds of sections in more than 75 major programs were conducted in 60 elementary, junior, and senior high schools and alternative sites. These programs involved more than 70,000 people per week. In addition, 1,100 individuals participated in 50 community councils. The public school system employs 48 community school directors, 34 home-school counselors, and 20 additional program support personnel to design, conduct, and evaluate these programs. The budget for this year reached $5 million, most of which comes from public tax funds and private foundation support.

Philosophically and operationally, the Flint Community Schools do not distinguish between community education and the K-12 instructional program. Personnel and program titles, schedules, curricula, budgets, and organizational structures are integrated. Because of this articulation, the Flint Community Schools qualify as the largest community education program in the world.

**Austin, Texas.** In Austin the community education program is a joint enterprise of the school district and city government. These institutions share equally in financing the program and developing policies and procedures. From its beginning, the program has used existing public school facilities to provide for services offered by various community agencies and organizations. In addition to 14 schools serving as community centers, programs are provided in such other sites as

recreation centers, churches, businesses, public housing facilities, and private homes.

Schools serving as centers must meet the following criteria:

1. evidence of community need,
2. supportive school staff and faculty,
3. a steering committee representative of the community,
4. willingness to coordinate services,
5. strong community support, and
6. some commitment of resources.

Programs offered in the community education centers are voluminous and diverse. In 1984-1985, almost 200,000 people were involved in more than 5,000 community education programs. When broken down by percentage, the programs fall into the following five categories: Academic (20.0%), Cultural/Social (4.1%), Personal Development (44.9%), Recreational (21.9%), and Vocational (9.1%).

The budget for these programs exceeded $1.5 million, which is derived from city and school district sources, tuition, and grants from the Texas Education Agency. In addition, more than 200 community businesses, agencies, and organizations are involved in these programs.

The Austin program's city-school district cooperation has been emulated in many other communities. In recognition of its effectiveness, the program received a special award in 1976 from the National Community Education Association.

**York, Nebraska.** Community education in this rural agricultural and agribusiness community in southeastern Nebraska began in 1974 and has grown steadily since its inception. Currently the York program serves the educational, social, cultural, and recreational needs of the community.

Shared facility usage is a key element of the York Community Education Program. The school district has adopted liberal policies regarding the use of school buildings and equipment by nonschool groups on the premise that school buildings are owned by the public and, therefore, should be made available. By sharing physical facilities,

major capital expenditures for such buildings are considered a good investment.

The York program prides itself on providing educational opportunities "from the cradle to the grave." Preschool and school-age enrichment programs, adult basic education activities, and college and university programs are all regularly available. Moreover, programs are provided at such nonschool sites as churches and the county jail.

There are three levels of personnel involved in the operation of the York Community Education Program. First, a community education director is employed to serve as the program's administrative agent. Second, more than 70 local individuals serve as part-time program instructors and activity leaders. Third, and most significant, the entire program is coordinated by the York Resources Council, an interagency advisory body comprised of representatives of major community organizations and agencies. A large number of volunteers keeps the program costs low; total expenditures for all program and personnel expenses were approximately $20,000 for 1984-85.

An important consideration in the York Community Education Program is the concept of empowerment. The programs are designed to help individuals retain control of their lives by becoming competent in dealing with community and individual problems. By providing highly individualized programs at all levels, participants come to feel that they are both teachers and learners.

**Elk River, Minnesota.** In Elk River the community education program operates in nine community schools located in three different municipalities, which make up School District 728. These programs are developed and managed by a district staff and supported by a 14-member Community Education Advisory Council. The council's membership is based on both geographic and clientele considerations. Accordingly, all communities within the district are represented; and there are representatives of the city recreation department, senior citizens, early childhood and family education, the handicapped, and the public schools.

During 1984-85, the community education program involved more than 12,000 participants of all ages in 396 structured activities. An

additional 26,000 individuals were involved in such nonstructured activities as open swimming, open gyms, and skating. Expenditures for 1984-85 reached $263,000, with almost $100,000 coming from local tax levies, about $17,000 from the state, and the balance from program receipts.

In addition to conventional community education activities, there are several special programs, including a community band, which plays a summer concert series; holiday concerts by a community orchestra and chorus; and the annual Elk River Community Festival, which features the displays of art and craft work, dramatic performances by local groups, information and food booths, and a marathon foot race.

The community education program was instrumental in establishing a community center in a school building. The center houses for-profit day-care and preschool programs, a nonprofit food and clothing distribution organization, and early childhood and family education programs. The center is financed principaliy by revenue from building leases and from short-term rentals.

Perhaps the most unusual program initiated by the Elk River community education program is the Elk River 2001 project. This began with a community-wide conference devoted to long-range community planning, and it now involves leaders from all sectors of the community. State and national speakers also are involved as presenters. The project addresses what local citizens would like Elk River to be like in 2001, and it requires deliberation on how a desirable future will be achieved.

Community education in Elk River is responsive to community needs, interests, and desires. Through its programs, local citizens are provided a kaleidoscope of activities for continuing education and involvement.

## Community Education as a Process

The process aspects of community education refer to the structure, procedures, and intent of interaction among individuals, organizations, agencies, and institutions in a community. While this interaction focuses on responding to community needs, problems, or concerns, there are less tangible benefits as well. Chief among these are developing a greater sense of community and a better understanding of how communities function.

Central to the process of community education is the notion of participatory democracy – that large numbers of informed citizens can be trusted to make wise decisions about matters that affect them directly. It also holds that through the processes of discussion, deliberation, and decision making, individuals are better educated as citizens and, therefore, become more valuable to their communities.

Structurally, the process takes a variety of forms, depending on the task at hand and the particular community involved. These groups have different titles; some of the more common are community council, community school committee, neighborhood task force, or community advisory council. These groups typically involve seven to 21 members and follow a meeting schedule of one or two sessions per month. While such groups often are permanent structures, their work may give impetus to the establishment of other, more specialized ad hoc groups.

The procedures employed by community education groups are quite conventional and would be difficult to distinguish from other community groups. They include such procedural considerations as establishing representative membership, scheduling meetings, parliamentary rules of order, agenda setting, decision-making style (for example, majority vote or consensus), etc.

The process aspect of community education groups that makes them unique is their intent, which includes community improvement and problem solving, interagency cooperation, and programming. Community education groups often describe their mission as "improving the quality of life in the community." They identify conditions that require improvement or problems that must be addressed, devise alternative solutions, select an appropriate alternative, and proceed with implementation. When projects are completed, they move on to new problems or improvements.

With interagency cooperation, groups are concerned with maximizing the availability and effectiveness of services within the community. Some interagency efforts require little more than a verbal agreement among their representatives to achieve a particular goal. In other cases, formal multiple-agency agreements are needed to clarify responsibility, determine liability, and allocate personnel. Usually the outcome of interagency cooperation is new or different forms of community service.

The most common function of community education groups is programming. The group reviews information on community needs and interests and makes decisions about types and numbers of programs needed. Because the group members live in the area and are broadly representative, they are ideally suited to make program recommendations. Occasionally these groups also become involved in program coordination and administration. The essence of the process is a citizens' meeting in which discussion, deliberation, planning, implementation, and evaluation go on.

It is through process that community education groups exercise power in achieving their goals. Even though this power is not formal in the statutory or legal sense, it is significant. The group's power is based on the collective influence of its members or, in the case of

interagency groups, on the credibility of the various organizations represented. Such power also is sometimes based on the ability to convene groups around critical community issues.

## Community Education Process in Action

Although process has been a factor in community education programs as long as they have been in existence, attention to matters of process is relatively recent. Fortunately, there are several community education programs that can serve as good examples of process. Three of these are reviewed below.

**Birmingham, Michigan.** The community education effort in Birmingham operates in 16 school communities, most of which have full-time or part-time community school organizers and are supported by a districtwide education staff. While the programs are extensive and diverse, it is the community education process that spawns and directs program development – a process of structured citizen participation. The major vehicle for citizen participation is the Community Education Central Advisory Council. This group consists of about 70 representatives from all local schools, school-related organizations, social service agencies, governmental units, civic groups, religious organizations, hospitals and health agencies, and business-related organizations. In addition to advising the board of education on all matters related to community education, the council facilitates communication among citizens, agencies, and institutions and plans, organizes, and implements community programs. These functions are carried out principally through a School/Neighborhood Committee and an Interagency Committee.

Another level of citizen participation is the local community school advisory council. These groups deal with issues and concerns of their respective neighborhood schools and surrounding communities. Although largely advisory, the community school councils make decisions regarding local school/neighborhood projects and programs. All community school councils are represented on the Community Education Central Advisory Council and, therefore, have a voice in community-wide decision making.

The Birmingham Area Seniors Coordinating Council constitutes a third level of community involvement. This council, made up of 20 appointed members, is concerned with the issues of older citizens. The council employs a small administrative and outreach staff who report to the districtwide coordinator. The work of the council is conducted largely through 15 committees, which involve additional citizens.

Finally, the community education process functions through special projects based on broader community need and interest. For example, the Industrial Technology Advisory Council recently was established to deal with the preparation of students for participation in an increasingly technical society. This group involves school personnel, representatives of business and industry, and technical experts from higher education. Other groups have been formed to address involvement of the local business community in school/business partnerships. Based on these activities, it is clear that Birmingham has a commendable record addressing community issues through the process of citizen participation.

**School District #2, New York, New York.** The community education process in School District #2 in New York City functions through its Community Education Advisory Council. The council advises the School District #2 Board of Education on education-related matters. In addition, the council is charged with determining policy and implementing community education activities. While the community education director makes most day-to-day program decisions, the council has general policy and program powers as delegated by the District Board.

The focus of the Community Education Advisory Council, unlike in other communities, is on coordinating existing community programs and efforts rather than creating new programs and services. Both the council and its education director perform liaison, convening, and problem-solving functions. This approach makes sense in an urban setting such as New York City, which is rich in agencies and other community resources.

Given the multicultural composition of the school community population, communication and dissemination pose unusual problems for

the program. To cope with this situation, community education personnel and advisory council members work with and through existing community leaders to reach various populations and constituencies. In this way they involve additional citizens in the community education process through an informal structure.

**Independence, Missouri.** Independence has one of the most comprehensive and systematic approaches to citizen participation in community decision making in the world. Founded in 1971 in an effort to promote greater neighborliness and civic involvement, the Independence Neighborhood Councils today are a prototype for participatory democracy. Their approach to process is best understood by reviewing the council network, related city-wide committees, and significant projects.

At the core of the Independence approach is a network of 42 neighborhood councils. The councils, made up of 20 elected representatives and 20 alternates, work within the neighborhood boundaries established originally in a comprehensive city plan. The councils focus on issues of neighborhood concern. Operating under the slogan "You don't have to move to live in the best neighborhood," the councils stress neighborhood communication and participation. The council network is supported by the Neighborhood Council Service Center, which provides ongoing training, meeting facilities, financial management services, and equipment.

City-wide committees constitute another process dimension in Independence. At present, 22 such committees exist, half of which address issues of cultural life within the community (social services, neighboring, family life, arts, human relations, leadership development) and half deal with governmental concerns (health, police, public works, fire protection, energy and environment, planning, parks and recreation). Committees are made up of representatives from all neighborhood councils and work directly with respective departments of city government.

The Independence approach to the community education process results in an extensive array of projects that serve people of all ages. In recent years the councils and committees have been involved in

more than 350 projects annually. Among the more unusual programs are city-wide arson and crime prevention programs, vacant-lot garden projects, home energy audits, neighborhood curb and gutter installations, voter registration drives, and neighborhood health surveys.

The entire Independence program is managed by the Council of Presidents, consisting of elected neighborhood council and city-wide committee presidents and vice presidents. The council formulates program policy and serves a general coordination and communication function.



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# The Pitfalls and the Promise in Community Education

Perhaps the greatest barrier to the success of the community education movement has been the tendency to view it in terms of potential problems rather than potential benefits. This is understandable since most educational administrators are not risk takers. The focus of their training has been on how to avoid problems rather than on taking chances with new ideas and new methods of sharing authority. As a result, community education tends to be viewed with some trepidation by a large number of school officials. If the movement is to enjoy greater success in the present and the future, the potential pitfalls must be acknowledged and dealt with; but the focus must be on the benefits – the promise of community education.

## Potential Pitfalls

Many of the concerns about community education voiced by school administrators are related to the bureaucratic structure of many school districts, where power and responsibility are restricted to those in high-level positions. Restricting power and authority to designated persons in an organization is perceived as sound administration and strong leadership. But, as we shall see, sharing power need not be an admission of weak leadership.

In the past three decades, there has been a growing body of research on organizational theory showing that leadership behaviors that are effective in industry and business may not work well in nonprofit, professionally dominated, human-intensive institutions. But if the local school board believes that schools should be run like General Motors, then it will be difficult to change institutional attitudes and practices to accept the advantages of shared decision making. Thus, the community education administrator who advocates shared decision making may face considerable resistance.

Inviting the public to share in decisions, opening the schools to community activities, and broadening the mission of the schools does increase the probability of conflict. When administrators feel that conflict is bad and is to be avoided, then the organization mobilizes its forces to eradicate it. True, conflict affects efficiency; decisions cannot be made quickly when many are involved. But is efficiency the sole criterion of a good school system?

Researchers of organization structure and management have identified the problems created by school administrators who consume much energy attempting to avoid or eradicate conflict. First, conflict is inevitable; no matter how hard an organization may try, it cannot be avoided entirely. Second, conflict may be healthy for an organization. Conflict is the breeding ground for change and may be necessary for a school system if emerging educational needs are to be addressed. Nevertheless, conflict can be dangerous. For the administrator who does not know how to manage conflict, the risks are great. In a school system where conflict is not tolerated, initiating activities that spawn conflict may place the administrator in a perilous situation.

When community education evolved in the 1960s, there were two schools of thought regarding the role of citizens. One camp advocated total community control, with empowerment through the participatory process. This position has obvious consequences for the decision-making and administrative roles in public school districts. The other camp advocated that control remain with the traditional structures – the school board and administration – but that the community education process should be advisory with citizen input for ideas, planning, evaluation, and other functions. Administrators who

have worked with parent advisory committees can testify that there is a fine line between advice and control. Citizens asked to participate may assume that they should have the power to make final decisions. Some citizens will demand control, while others will be satisfied simply with the opportunity to participate.

Another potential pitfall is that community education raises expectations for services, requiring additional human and fiscal resources. School systems have fiscal limitations, and the suggestion that they should assume even greater program responsibilities may be rejected with the argument that the schools simply are expected to do too much.

Being labeled a weak leader, creating conflict, confusing participation with control, and raising public expectations are the most common potential pitfalls of community education. Preoccupation with these potential problems can result in an out-of-hand rejection of community education. However, given current conditions in which school administrators are looking for ways to restore public confidence and support, community education may well be a part of the answer because of its potential benefits.

## Potential Benefits

Today, with fewer and fewer adults having any contact with the schools, it is not surprising that public support is diminishing for an institution they perceive as providing little or no personal benefits. At the same time, there is a growing acceptance of the concept of lifelong education, which is placing new demands on local school systems, particularly in the area of adult education. Although adult education is only one part of community education, the community education model offers a framework in which adult education can develop.

Increasing adult participation results in several dividends for the school system. For example, greater utilization of a school building in the evening, on weekends, and over the summer could result in a neighborhood school remaining open despite declining student enrollments. It could result in public support for a tax levy to improve a school building. Citizens who use a facility can see what needs improvement, and they become willing to be a part of the solution.

Then there are curricular benefits to involving parents and other citizens in the instructional program. Citizens are resources for instruction. They can enhance the school curricula and feel they are contributing to the total process of improving community life.

Research on effective schools reveals two factors closely associated with community education. First, good schools are places where the professional staff is willing to risk, to try new ideas. Second, effective schools are places where everyone is a learner – teachers, principals, even secretaries and custodians. By example, the adults in good schools affirm the importance of education. This facet of good schools is at the heart of community education. When the community places a high value on education, students are given a model of using education to solve problems and to improve the quality of life.

A final benefit relates to change. Science and its technological applications are advancing at an accelerated rate. Social scientists cite the dangers to organizations if they remain static in a dynamic environment. This is an especially persuasive argument for public schools to seek continuous improvement. The profession's knowledge base must be constantly updated, and instructional models must be altered to reflect the knowledge base. People will accept such change if they are a party to creating it. That is, positive change is more likely to succeed, at least politically, if there is community involvement and consensus in setting goals, making plans, and creating new programs. The loss of community identity that occurred with urbanization in America may never be restored fully, but the community education model has the potential of recapturing some of the valued aspects of community living (for example, a sense of identity, a sense of personal worth).

## Some Final Thoughts

Is community education an achievable alternative? Many advocates thought so in the early 1970s, but the movement never really matured as expected. Now, conditions are favorable for a second chance. The public schools are facing unprecedented challenges. Social concerns are increasing. There is growing acceptance of the concept of

lifelong learning. If schools and communities fail to respond, the survival of public education, as we know it, may be in question.

Schools are not the only governmental units that have become isolated from the public. They are, nevertheless, in the most favorable position to restore public confidence. Many in the general public continue to be skeptical about the effectiveness of public elementary and secondary schools and are reluctant to provide additional resources for improvement. The greatest promise for changing these attitudes rests with an active partnership between the schools and the individuals who own them. Isolation fosters suspicion, yet research on public attitudes supports the notion that "familiarity breeds support" when it comes to schooling.

Perhaps the greatest factor affecting a more favorable atmosphere for community education is the changing view of educational leadership and management. Slowly the myopic idea that schools and factories should be managed in the same way is being abandoned. Prospective school administrators at many institutions are devoting equal time to studying social science and administration. A new vision for organizational climate and leadership style offers promise that the second coming of community education may have lasting effects.

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